The Fourth Church Pulpit

CHRISTIAN COMMON SENSE ABOUT POLITICS

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: 1 Samuel 8:4-22; Mark 12:13-17

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,
and to God the things that are God's."
—Mark 12:17 (NRSV)

The Christian religion was born in the midst of a difficult, sometimes tortuous relationship with a political state. That State, the Roman Empire, first ignored Christianity as one more marginal, ethnic cult, and then was amused by its peculiar beliefs, and then began to regard it as a threat to the public peace and to its own authority and to persecute it. Then the State decided to adopt it, to make it official, and to protect, defend and sponsor its existence and its growth. Finally, that State, the Roman Empire, was eclipsed by it. "Out of the ashes of the Empire rose the throne of St. Peter and the Papacy," is the way the historians put it.

You might even say that the relationship of church to state, of faith to politics, has been critically important to Christians from the beginning and, further, that it has been anything but a simple matter for us.

And so a sermon on "Christian Common Sense About Politics" for the third of July.

I love the Fourth of July. I love the simplicity and integrity of parades, fireworks, picnics. One of the best pieces on patriotism I ever read was written by the late Joseph Sittler, Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago. Sittler said:

> "Before the word America can set one thinking or planning or resolving or defending, it ought to set one dreaming and remembering. And out of this dreamed procession of America as a concrete place will be poured the ingot of a tough and true patriotism." [*Grace Notes and Other Fragments,* p. 101]

I love the Fourth of July because it is an opportunity to remember and dream: remember what this nation, this ...vely and fragile experiment is about, and dream about what it could be for generations to come. And for people of faith, it is an opportunity — an obligation, I actually believe, to reflect on the relationship between our faith commitments and our commitment to the public, or political arena.

The best way to celebrate the Fourth of July, I have been told, is to return to the U.S.A. from a trip abroad. This year I learned the truth of that advice. Some of us returned on Friday at the end of twelve days in Italy, a good portion of which was spent, in one way or another, thinking about the historic connections and disconnections between our religion and the political state. Members of the Morning Choir and twenty church members traveled to Rome and Florence; the choir sang three wonderful concerts to very appreciative audiences. Last Sunday morning the choir sang and we all attended worship at the Waldensian Church in Rome. The Waldensians are Italian Protestants who are part of The Reformed Presbyterian family. (So if the person sitting beside you nods off you might say, "Bon Giorno." If he or she responds in kind, you'll know your neighbor is sleeping off a little jet lag.)

The topic was set for me by one of the first things we saw as soon as we arrived in Rome: the tomb where tradition says St. Paul was held before his martyrdom by Rome. There is, of course, no historical verification, but whether or not he was held in that spot and executed in the place the tour guide explains, no one much disputes the notion that he was in prison and along with thousands of others, branded a traitor by the political authorities, arrested, tortured and executed.

It was a sobering reminder that at the beginning we learned to be leery of the State. Christians in Rome, for fear of being exposed and identified, dug tunnels underground to bury their own dead, and then used those same tunnels, the Catacombs, for worship and socialization.

But it was no more sobering for me, at least, than the visible reminder of what happens when the State adopts Christianity, incorporates it, sponsors it. The Emperor Constantine, in 303, legalized Christianity and before long Christianity was the official religion of Rome and for 1,600 years the church acted like God's government on earth. In a recent essay on the Church in the Third Millennium, theologian Juergen Moltmann observes that for more than a thousand years, the church —

> "Instead of spreading the Gospel of Christianity in order to awaken faith, spread the Kingdom of Christ in order to rule in God's name." [*Theology Today,* April, 1994]

One day Jesus dealt with it. It's near the end of the story when the conflict between him and the religious and political authorities has deepened. A group of critics has come to contend with him, perhaps even discredit him in the eyes of his increasingly zealous followers. They ask a question for which there is no good answer: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?" The tax in question is the head tax, a hated reminder that the real authority in Israel is Caesar. However he answers, he's going to be in trouble. The Zealots, a fanatically nationalistic political organization, of which Judas Iscariot may have been a member, held that the tax was illegal and should not be paid as a gesture of civil disobedience. Many people secretly admired them and their brave protests against Roman authority.

If Jesus said, "Pay the tax it is legitimate," he would, in fact, have discredited himself with many people as a Roman collaborator. On the other hand, if he took the Zealot position and advised not paying the tax he would have been arrested on the spot for sedition.

His response, in that circumstance, is subtle and remarkable: "Let me see a coin" he says. The image of Caesar was on the coin – it was Caesar's money, government money.

"Give it to him," Jesus says, "it's his anyhow. Give to God what is God's."

A simplistic way to interpret his answer is that there is no connection between religious faithfulness and the political arena. And it seems, at first, as if that is exactly what he means. Religion and politics are completely distinct. Keep them altogether separate. Be an obedient citizen and a faithful Christian in separate ways. It has been a popular notion within Western Christianity: two realms – "the City of God and the City of Man" with no relationship between them. It was the theological rationale behind the ability of some Christians in Nazi Germany, to work in the death camps all week and go to church on Sunday.

That total separation of religion from politics would have been surprising to Jesus. Actually, he is teaching one of Israel's oldest and most precious creeds, the sovereignty of God. Actually, it is a sarcastic answer and his hearers probably got it. Caesar is thrown a crumb.

> "Here. . . look at his picture. . . give him what he has coming. The Lord God, the sovereign and only King of all creations, owns everything. You owe everything to God: everything you have, everything you are."

The ones who have come to discredit him are astonished. It's not the answer they wanted. God is Lord of all: all individuals, all nations, emperors and empires; God is sovereign even over religious institutions. It is an amazing answer. It describes an active engagement of faithful people in the political process, but it is very clear about where ultimate sovereignty or authority lie.

It is not an easy lesson to learn. Our Old Testament lesson this morning is one of our oldest stories, from a time when God's people had not yet made the transition from a federation of tribes, recently settled down after wandering around the desert, to a nation, with institutions to maintain and borders to secure and policies to establish. Prophets, priests and judges have been political structures enough for the tribes of Israel but now they want to be like other nations. "Give us a king," they say to Samuel, their prophet and leader. And Samuel, with wit and eloquence, tells them about the ways of a King.

> "He'll draft your son for the army, he'll appropriate your farms, he'll take your daughters for his household, he'll take a tenth of your grain, and your cattle and donkeys. Sooner or later, you'll think your purpose is to provide for the comfort and well being of the King."

Samuel is very leery of concentrated political power. His warning to the children of Israel was the text of many a diatribe against our own government in the 60s.

Interestingly God is not quite as grim about the political prospects as Samuel. "Listen to the people," God tells Samuel. "Give them a King." God is a realist. After all, there aren't any good alternatives. God sounds like Winston Churchill, who in a debate about the strengths and weaknesses of democracy admitted that democracy is full of weaknesses, inefficiencies, but every other system of government is worse. Israel has to start acting like a nation in order to survive. But there is a wistfulness to it, almost as if God knows people are always going to have trouble with this and furthermore that the ones who become king, the political authorities, are always going to have trouble acknowledging their own limits. God knows, apparently, that the temptation is always for the King or Queen – the State, if you will – to think that it is God.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. The earliest Christian Creed was "Jesus Christ is Lord" and in the days of high Roman imperialism, it was a political statement. What it meant was "The emperor is not Lord. The state is not Lord." And in that simple affirmation, Christianity deprived the emperor, and every litarianism in history, from Nero to Hitler, to failed Marxist regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the viet Union, the one thing totalitarianism must have, and that is the unquestioned loyalty and obedience of its subjects. "Jesus Christ is my Lord" was first of all a political statement. And people who said it were not scolded for their misguided theology. They were executed for treason.

One of the most important and most precious tenets of Christian faith, as we Presbyterians see it, is the sovereignty of God and therefore the limitations on the sovereignty of any human authority – king, government, or church. "God alone is Lord of the conscience" we like to say and by that we mean that there is about you and me something which we owe to no one but God and furthermore that good government understands that about itself.

It is why many of us are uncomfortable with the carefully planned strategy of the religious right to gain control of the Republican Party. The Christian Coalition is an attempt to enforce one group's notion of what is good and true and moral on all the rest of us; an attempt to assume for itself the mind of God in matters like the right of a woman to choose an abortion, accessibility of birth control information and devices, what books will be available in school and public libraries, in the name of Christian values and the Christian character of our nation.

The fact is that while Christian and particularly Presbyterian influences are there from the beginning, there is not and never has been a Christian nation. It is a nation in which Christians have been more free to be Christian in whatever way they wish than anywhere else in the world. And it has also been a place where people are free not to be Christian; to be Jewish, or Muslim, or Buddhist, or nothing.

The glory of this experiment is precisely its idea of the limitations of government when it comes to matters of conscience and faith and its protection of the liberty of all its citizens to follow the dictates of their own conscience.

We're different in this respect. Leslie Gelb wrote an editorial in the *New York Times* a while ago in which he observed that most of the nations of the world are organized on some principle of exclusion: race, religion, language, ethnicity. And with frightening violence, exclusive groups are willing to go to war with other groups to protect their n exclusiveness.

I don't travel a lot, but every time I am out of the country, I understand more clearly how unique and precious this experiment is. We are different here. This is for all of us. This means to include us all. A friend of mine works for the Chicago Stock Exchange and spends a lot of time traveling in Third World countries. He is an African-American and I assume that he knows something about racial exclusiveness. My assumption is that it has not been easy for him in the world of banking. Recently I heard him make a speech and say, "I'm a liberal and there's a lot about what's going on that I don't like, but I love this country. I travel a lot and I see the lines of people at our embassies all over the world trying to get in. Why? Because they've heard about freedom and opportunity and chance here: that everybody is included."

Cornel West, head of the Department of African-American studies at Princeton, said in a speech recently that the loss of that sense of community, the inclusive community, is our greatest danger.

> "Two hundred and eighteen years after the beginning of this precious democratic project, democracy is fragile. . . particularly this notion that we are all in this together, that if the ship springs a leak, we are all going to drown."

West and other historians note that the founders of the Republic, even though they did not include the people who were brought here as slaves, nevertheless put in place a system that acknowledges the public arena, the common good. It's in the Preamble to the Constitution.

> "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution. . ."

"The general welfare." It's for all of us, not just those of us who came from Northern Europe, but those who came from Asia, and Southern Europe, and Africa and South America and those who were already here and who have the only really legitimate claim on the land.

Cornel West is one of a growing number of thoughtful critics who suggest that the radical and romanticized individualism which is such an integral part of how Americans see themselves, may prove to be our most vulnerable characteristic, and our most serious weakness. Consider the unprecedented violence that threatens to destroy our cities. What else can one make of a country where children carry handguns to schools, where murder is the leading cause of death for African-American males, where we seem determined in the name of individual freedom to not be satisfied until each one of us is armed against all the rest of us? No other country in the world thinks like that — that "Dodge City privatization of security," West says, "except maybe Rwanda."

As we head toward the end of the century, we need a renewed sense of the public good, the general welfare. We Christians particularly need to take our stand for a nation and a culture which is truly inclusive, where no one is excluded by reason of race, religion, ethnicity. And we need to make our voice heard a little more clearly when the name "Christian" is misappropriated by any coalition, any church, that claims God's truth, God's will is its own private property.

We need to stop shouting slogans at one another and learn again the gift of public discourse, expressing differences of opinion about important matters without calling into question the political loyalty or religious orthodoxy of others.

Analysts of the left and the right, liberals and conservatives, lament the spiritual impoverishment of our nation at this point in its history, the loss of meaning and hope, the absence of a vision of the nation's purpose and destiny. From all sides of the political spectrum comes a new awareness that a culture driven apparently only by its market, and the market values it spawns, is a poor culture ultimately; and if history is any teacher, a culture destined to either collapse or to spin apart into small, rigidly structured, self-interested, and self-absorbed segments.

So may I presume to suggest that our fundamental need in these times is to recover the truly traditional values which do have their roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition at its best, its most liberal and open and inclusive?

May I suggest to you that we cannot and should not try to go back to a vision of our nation as an extension of Great Britain, white and Christian. But instead, in the name of the God of the whole creation, who created human beings in many colors, embrace with faith and eagerness the gorgeous pluralism which tries to exist here?

And may I suggest that it is our religious duty to welcome customs and mores of others, even when so to do means limiting our right to practice our own publicly.

And may I suggest that among our most precious values is a sense of the community, the public, the whole people, and that when all the people do not have access to the best the culture produces — health care, education, public safety, housing, transportation, and opportunity — by reason of economics, race or political intent, it is our sacred duty to change the system and to do better. And that it is the only way we will survive?

And we should, I presume to suggest, give God thanks for the precious experiment that in spite of its lapses, its occasional forgetfulness about its own most precious traditions, still intends to include all of God's children and to hold up to the world a picture of what human life under God's sovereignty might look like.

And may I suggest finally that not only did our Lord Jesus not suggest a separation of religion and politics, but quite the opposite, quite radically so? May I suggest that public political involvement is our sacred duty; that he calls us to give Caesar his due in the context of God's sovereignty, the God of all people, all nations, all races. . . the God to whom we owe everything. . . and whom to serve is both our sacred duty and highest joy?

Amen.